

Leonard L. Piper from Blairsville, Pennsylvania, is working his first season. He's 23 years old and a WW II veteran.

David R. Navon, a veteran also, is 25 and hails from Modesto, California. Like Piper, it's his first season.

Merle "Skip" Stratton is the 16th smokejumper on the plane. But, Stratton has been getting airsick on his last few dispatches and the flight from Missoula to Helena is rough with considerable turbulence. He gets sick on this flight, too, and after vomiting into his helmet he decides not to make the jump into Mann Gulch. Stratton will not escape Mann Gulch, however. The very next day he's directed to return, not to help control the fire, but to help recover the bodies of his fellow jumpers.

At 3:10 PM the C-47 arrives over the fire. Cooley and Dodge move to the floor of the open rear door of the airplane. They survey the fire. Later, both men would testify the fire is 50 to 60 acres in size and still burning along the ridgeline separating Meriwether Canyon and Mann Gulch. The smoke and fire are moving in a northeasterly direction, right up the ridgeline.

At somewhere between 3:15 and 3:20 PM Dodge and Cooley agree on a jumpspot for the men and equipment. After ruling out a small meadow on the Mann Gulch/Meriwether Canyon ridgeline out in front of the advancing fire, they decide on a spot at the head of Mann Gulch. This jump spot has few trees to complicate the jump, is 500 feet lower in elevation than the fire on the ridgeline, and is nearly one-half mile from the blaze.

At 3:35 PM, after dropping their test chutes to determine how wind speed and direction would effect the drift of the men and supply parachutes, the first group of four men jump from the C-47; Wag Dodge is the first one out of the plane. Huber takes the C-47 around in a large lazy circle and the next group of four men jump into the head of the gulch. He makes another round, heads down the gulch and four more smokejumpers step from the plane. Another turn and the last group of three men step out into space.

Now on a routine drop of men and supplies, at this point the pilot would normally lose some elevation before dropping the cargo chutes containing the hand tools, water, food, radio, first aid kit and other supplies. The reason for doing this is the cargo chutes are uncontrolled and making the drop from a low elevation insures the supplies will come down reasonably near the jumpers. But, perhaps as an inkling of things to come, the air in Mann Gulch has become turbulent and Huber is forced to maintain the same altitude from which he has just dropped the smokejumpers.

On the next pass Cooley and his assistant Nash kick out the first of the cargo chutes. Everything is routine until they come to the parachute which coincidently contains the jumpers' single radio. When this cargo pack is pushed from the plane, the static line---a braided metal cable attached to the airplane on one end and attached to the parachute cover on the other end to deploy the parachute---snaps in two before the parachute is deployed. The cargo pack free-falls about 1,200 vertical feet and smashes into the ground down-slope about 400 yards from the jump spot on the west side of the drainage bottom. The radio and much of the other supplies in this pack are destroyed.

All the cargo is out by 4:08 PM. The C-47 makes another two passes over Mann Gulch and at 4:12 PM Cooley and Nash spot the orange streamers the crew has laid out in a double "L" indicating everyone's landed safely. The C-47 turns west and heads for Missoula.

As soon as the last cargo chute touches down the men begin to retrieve their gear and equipment. This task would normally take a crew this size about 15 minutes to complete, but because they were dropped from such a high altitude and the cargo chutes are scattered across the upper end of the gulch, it takes the crew 45 minutes to an hour to gather up the parachutes and pack the cargo packs to a central location Dodge has selected near the bottom of the drainage. This extra 30-45 minutes becomes critical time lost in their race with the fire later that afternoon.

At about 5:00 PM Foreman Dodge instructs the crew to grab a bite to eat, get some water, gather their hand tools and follow him up the south side of the canyon to the fire on the ridge. He tells them he's going to go up to the fire and tie in with the guy who has been yelling and whistling (Jim Harrison).

Leaving the crew under Bill Hellman's command, Dodge drops into the drainage bottom and then heads up the hill for the ridgeline and the fire. Though the timber is quite thick, Dodge is able to contact Jim Harrison in short order. But, once on the fireline Dodge is concerned about how actively the fire is burning. He makes a quick assessment and instructs Harrison to follow him and join the rest of the crew. Dodge and Harrison then retrace Dodge's route heading back to the cargo assembly area near the draw bottom. However, when they are about half-way down the slope they encounter the rest of the jumper crew headed up to the fire with Hellman in the lead.

Dodge explains to Hellman that he doesn't like the looks of things on the ridge and instructs Hellman to take the crew and head them down the gulch to the Missouri River. His thinking is to attack the fire from the rear and the safety of the river. Dodge adds that he and Harrison are going to proceed on to the cargo spot to get water and something to eat.

While all this is taking place, Jansson and Hersey have been busy organizing their small force of 19 firefighters and getting them transported from Helena to the Gates of the Mountains Boat Club launch and then down river. On his first trip down the river Jansson decides the mouth of Mann Gulch is no place for a firecamp and moves the location to Meriwether. Here he quickly sets up a camp and dispatches Hersey and the 19 men to the fire and the top of the ridge. He is concerned about Jim Harrison's whereabouts since Jim was supposed to report in on the radio at 3:00 PM and no one has heard from him. Jansson assumes---correctly it turns out---that Harrison has tied in with the smokejumper crew.

At about 5:02 PM, after several vain attempts to scout out the fire from several locations in a boat on the river, Jansson is dropped at the mouth of Mann Gulch and begins to hike up the drainage bottom to both see where the fire is burning and to try to make contact with the jumpers. He proceeds up the draw bottom several hundred yards and encounters the fire. Somewhat foolishly it turns out, Jansson picks his way through the burning trees, brush and grass and continues up the draw. In the midst of the conflagration he thinks he hears someone shouting and pushes on until finally the heat and smoke are just too much. He turns around only to find he appears to be trapped in the flames and smoke. Knowing his only escape is back towards the river, Jansson runs and dives through the dense smoke and fire. He makes it through but then passes out for a few minutes, probably from smoke inhalation. He comes to, is immediately sick and then vomits violently. After a few moments he gets back to his feet and picks his way through the fire back to the boat still waiting for him at the river. He is returned to the firecamp at Meriwether.